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Fall 10-1-2002

## Writing Sample

Michael Zeller

Includes "Remembering Maja," "Song of the Blackbirds" and "Music for Jason."

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### Recommended Citation

Zeller, Michael, "Writing Sample" (2002). *International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work*. 61.  
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Michaal ZELLER

## **Remembering Maja**

He really didn't want to explain to himself why this particular encounter had remained so vivid in his memory, as fresh as ever, as if it had just happened. And yet years had gone by, and since that time he had never once set eyes on the woman again. Even her name had slipped his memory.

When Jochen Bieroth thought back to this story - one day, he must have been approaching thirty at the time, his second novel had probably appeared already, his telephone rang; it was a woman he didn't know. Yes, it had all begun with the telephone call, nothing out of the ordinary whatsoever. Nonetheless: her voice sounded stressed. Bieroth had the impression that the woman had formulated her sentences beforehand and was driven by the anxiety to avoid saying the wrong thing at all costs. Would he please excuse her for forcing herself upon him, she was certainly forcing herself, he couldn't know her, but she knew him, "that's true", from his books. And in the summer she had seen him for real, giving a reading, in the cherry orchard, and it wasn't only his texts that had given her, yes indeed, the courage to call him up, it was also the way he had read them. Her voice offered neither itself nor him any respite. Incidentally: It was conceivable - but only barely - that he knew her after all.

"When the organizer was making his introduction you looked at me.. .so intensely..."

Would it be possible for her to give him a small clue, he said, interrupting the unknown voice.

"Excuse me?" she asked startled. Then all he could hear was hesitation, as if she were being called upon to reveal something significant, for which she was unprepared. She was - hesitation - she was "a little on the big side" and "no longer.. .quite so young..."

Of course, this was of very little help. Polite as he was on such occasions, he resorted to evasion. This stare, he said, was a sort of concentration exercise before a reading. He would fix his gaze on a particular point, often enough on a face in the public, without actually taking in the person he was staring at. And, he added, to divert her even more, it was a way of collecting one's thoughts, in fact quite a common one.

He surely wanted to know, yes, she wanted to - without picking up what he had said the woman stumbled around in her own pre-formulated half-sentences -, yes, she wanted to - what: to invite him to her house, if this weren't too much of an imposition, a small circle of friends, of course, she added hastily, to an evening get-together. Friends of hers would be there, people she worked with, all lovers of good literature, and an old school-friend

had also agreed to come, a dentist, well established, a man, incidentally, with a penchant for patronage.

Finally the voice dropped off, stopped for breath. Was it the dentist, with a penchant for patronage, or was it some other thrill which made him spontaneously take up the invitation?

A large apartment block, built for the well-situated, before the turn of the century. Bieroth could still see before him the wood paneling in the stairwell. Highly polished floorboards - they gave his every step a different sound.

Third floor. Someone standing in the open door. A woman, stocky, perhaps twenty years older than himself, in other words about fifty, in a black dress, of satin, with a pearl necklace: This was how she was waiting in the door. Her face broad and full and flushed. Her lips trembled. The hand that drew him into the hallway was hot. The living room was lit by candles, curtains were drawn. A heavy scent of flowers increased his sense of being shut in. He looked around, spotted the huge bunch of chrysanthemums on a lace cloth. Next to them, on a tea trolley, several glasses, aperitifs, a glass bowl with cocktail nibbles.

"Home-made," said the woman behind him in a low voice, "according to an old family recipe." She had organized the campari just for him. She knew, she said, from one his poems that he liked campari. And so Bieroth had to inwardly part from the dry sherry - at least for the time being.

She in the armchair, he on the sofa, sinking deep. The woman spoke about his first novel. She recounted an episode from the novel, talking almost as disjointedly as she had done on the telephone. He couldn't remember the story at all.

Just three sentences and no more, appended to this episode, she said, three short sentences in which he described how he had cut his ties with his parents' home. It had moved her deeply at that time, she said, and she was still moved by it - just before he came she had read the passage again -, the conciseness was the thing. He drank and refilled both glasses.

The woman grew calmer as she spoke. She was a little plump, but not fat. He was struck by the tight skin on her upper arms. And when she stood up and went to the telephone, walking into the long hallway with the bookshelves, he observed: her calves above her block heels were tight rather than plump.

She came back. Someone couldn't come. She raised her eyebrows. She talked about politeness, he remembered, about etiquette and the way it had changed. He told her how every five years or so he would change from the polite German form for you, the 'Sie' form, to 'Du', the form used for close friends. Currently he was once again in a 'Sie' phase. He liked the distance it afforded and the possibility of coming closer to someone - linguistically - if wanted, a possibility that would otherwise be squandered. As indicated: at that time he was a man of thirty.

"It is the change, a change in ourselves and in society," he lectured, balancing the campari glass on his knee. "I enjoy the change and the flexibility. And it also has a lot to do with tactics."

What she missed was a degree of lightness, his hostess replied. She had always kept to the 'Sie' form, "as I learnt to do in my parents' house, if you like." But at the moment he hadn't gotten any further than she had, she laughed cautiously, the first time she laughed. That was comforting for her to know.

"That's something we have in common at least."

Bieroth was at a loss. Did he want to become better acquainted or more evasive when he said: "At the end of the day it all amounts to the same thing, above all if you step far enough back from everything and practice selfdenial." He immediately sensed that this comment was out of place. Now he took a glass of sherry after all.

"Human freedom," said the woman softly and breathed in deeply. The pearl necklace lifted on her large bosom and then rolled together on the satin.

In the meantime her face had lost something of its flush, above all on the cheeks. He noticed the burst veins under her eyes. The eyes themselves -

"Human freedom," she was once again beginning, when the doorbell rang. She immediately jumped up, as if she had been waiting for the doorbell. No sound could be heard from the hallway. She returned alone. Someone she worked with and who lived in the same building had to cancel. She had unexpectedly received guests.

"Yes, the freedom of human beings." The woman had not lost the thread of the conversation. Regret that someone had been unable to come did not show itself on her face. In the meantime he was eating what she had made to go with the aperitifs. She lit one of those long cigarettes especially made for women. As she did so, he noticed her wedding ring. She was wearing it, however, on the wrong hand.

Man clung to his roots more tightly than his head was willing to admit. The intellect, the mind - it managed to free itself - thought-lessly - from dependencies, simply by naming them all. It played with words to describe them and thought it had already conquered them.

"Perhaps that is true of people who paint, write, compose: of artists." The woman spoke the word 'artists' in a raised voice, in a rapturous tone which once again drove him to the sherry. Artists, yes she had faith in them. Yes, she admired them for this lightness.

"Three short sentences, as I said..."

That was not for her, though.

"The roots hold a normal person like me in an iron grip, hold him down, on the ground." He liked her bright gray eyes, small eyes that could sparkle. The hair with its permanent wave - it was dark blonde with the first signs of gray. Attractive, he thought, and filled their glasses again. When it came to

drinking she kept up well.

What she now had to say didn't come easily. She stopped at nearly every word. She had learnt the meaning of honesty in her parents' house, she said, and that's why she also wanted to be honest towards him. The dentist with a penchant for patronage wasn't directly an invention, but a hypothesis.

Smiling self-deprecatingly in shame made her look young. He had, it was true, suggested the possibility of his appearance that evening, but had not been able or willing to commit himself. He was married, you see. No, quite honestly, she considered the probability of him now appearing to be on the slender side. She was saying this, so that she could continue to talk with him, "without having this stupid feeling constantly at the back of my mind." After this confession she sank even deeper into the armchair and crossed her legs. Her knee was exposed. She immediately pulled her dress over it, as far as it went. Her shin was covered with thick fluffy hair.

The many aperitifs made it easy for him to accommodate himself to the changes the evening brought. Of course, he couldn't help noticing, just at that moment as she swept back her hair, that her armpits were unshaven. They were hollows of dark curly hair.

Again the telephone went. He sat up startled.

While she was talking in the hallway, he inspected her record collection. The Bolero seemed to be the most suitable. He placed it on the turntable.

When she returned, the woman threw her head back like a young girl.

"It didn't have anything to do with tonight," she said and seemed relieved. With her she had a bottle of red wine and a corkscrew; these she held out to him.

She had gained the impression that man could not free himself from his roots, "not an inch". They were more deeply entrenched in us than we knew or wanted to admit. "What we have become we owe to others, or should I say: We remain in their debt?"

The wine glass touching her lips, her eyes laughed in his direction. And she was still laughing as she lit another cigarette, was now laughing, leant back, a quite strange laugh with irregular, strong teeth, in which at the top two gold fragments flashed. He couldn't understand the reason for the laughter, but he liked the blond fluff on her upper lip. When she leant forward to the ashtray, her breasts pushed upward in her small décolleté.

"And every act of liberation is nothing more than. . . self-deception!"

Apparently she was not able to leave the subject behind.

"Perhaps it's even more than that. Perhaps it is betrayal. It's something I experience very clearly in my family, unfortunately." She snuggled into the armrest. She had given up the struggle to keep her knee covered. Although he would have preferred to talk to her about other things, for example about the ring she was wearing, he enjoyed listening to the beautiful contralto voice, even though what she was saying was strange, perhaps even unpleasant.

Yes, in literature, in music, she continued, in art altogether, that was where freedom was found, the freedom she was yearning for, nowhere else was it found. And that was why she had become an avid reader.

“Which serves me in good stead,” he interjected and raised his glass in her direction. She didn’t drink with him but instead listened to a few cadences from the Bolero until at a point of repetition they seemed to fall away into emptiness. She seemed to be reflecting on something. (At this point in his reminiscences Bieroth christened the woman Maja to avoid always having to think of her as ‘her’ or ‘the woman’. That had changed.) Then she sat down - Maja. That is to say, Maja perched herself abruptly on the edge of the seat and leant over towards him.

“I would like to show you something that I . . . I have shown so far to very few people.” She stood up and returned with a shoebox, cleared away all the cushions to one side, so that they both had space on the couch. They sat close to each other, Maja with the shoebox on her bare knees - filled to the brim. Her face was once again very flushed - caused by the papers which she still kept concealed with her two hands? Then she took heart.

“My father’s letters sent by military post.” They now lay open before his eyes.

The faded envelopes were numbered, the numbers written in pencil, each within a carefully drawn circle.

“From mother,” was Maja’s short reply to his question. He could feel the tension in her body even before she handed him the first letter. Why her mother had handed over the letters struck him as strange. Maja ignored his curiosity. She rocked her upper body causing the pearls on her bosom to bounce this way and that. Although they were sitting so close to one another - he had placed the wine next to the sofa, between their legs to avoid the annoyance of having to keep getting up -, despite this closeness he had the impression that they had become strangers again, almost as at the beginning of his visit.

He carefully held the brittle paper, older than he was, between his fingers, and read. The letter had been written with one of those blue-gray fountain pens which probably no longer exist today. It was dated Autumn 1943. “My dear Else and dear children” stood at the top, it was signed “Your loving Konrad and Daddy”.

Maja placed the letters, one after the other, into his hands, and, whenever she held her breath while doing so, he knew that that particular letter had been written for her alone, the daughter who was barely ten years old. And yet he could read little more than exhortations to “my so very big daughter” to watch over her younger brother, Jockele, and to be a good girl and help her mother with the housework.

No, it really wasn’t the case that he had to read a huge amount that evening. He only needed to unfold the letters and Maja was leaning over him, looking at her father’s handwriting. At a glance she knew what the letter was

about and related the contents. He tasted her warm breath. She would often point to a line, and in doing so her breast touched his lower arm. But Maja didn't seem to notice.

"Ah yes, exactly, at that time he was still in the training garrison in southern Germany.. Then they were sent, in the spring of 1944, to the Saar."

There was no mention in these letters of military action, nothing about the exertions, dissatisfaction, the doubts. He shouldn't forget, and Maja raised her voice as if she had to defend her father: These letters had to get past the censor. But he was probably still too young to fully understand the circumstances.

He sensed how Maja was slipping away from him when talking of these past events, letter by letter. For that reason he kept drinking. At least on this point she didn't let him down.

Still in the Saarland. Her father complained that he had spent the whole of that Sunday in the office, without being able to step out into the "beautiful warm air". Maja's eyes offered him no pause for reflection. She drove him forwards. They sat body next to body, their thighs rubbing. The warmth of her body rose into his. He noticed that even his head had grown flushed in the meantime. He felt the blood pounding in his ears.

And the journey continued, across the whole Reich, to the front in the southeast, to the Balkans. The unit didn't have a definite goal. Instead of the home-leave that was due, rail journeys lasting long nights. Traveling just a few kilometers past his hometown, his family within easy reach. But nonetheless no complaints. It was certainly tiring, sitting in the cramped carriage, and he apologized for the leave that hadn't materialized. But he also described the beauty of the countryside through which they were traveling, the slow sunsets.

In none of these letters had Bieroth been able to discover one intimate or simply personal remark meant for his wife. Maja was surprised at his observation.

"The letters were read out loud, by mother, they belonged to the whole family," she told him and then once again became a little more hurried when the next envelope came, for this letter was addressed to her personally. She read the letter with him, word for word, her bosom rising and falling on his arm. And they really were the most personal lines that he had so far seen.

Her father talked of a walk he had taken in the early summer, alone with his daughter. He recalled the meadow of cowslips and the glass of beer that she had spilt over his lap in the forest tavern, "and your sprained left ankle on the way home, can you remember how we cooled it down in the brook?" Like that, more or less, was the way he expressed himself. Her father promised on his return home to repeat the walk, one just like it, and only with her, with her alone.

While he read, Maja's eyes jumped back and forth between his face and her father's words. All the time she was turning the ring on her finger which

she wore on the wrong hand.

“Mother’s wedding ring. She left it to me,” Maja said, gulping down her wine.

In no way had they reached the end. Maja guided him impatiently past one or two letters to the thick envelope, not in the decaying brown like the others, but blue and without an address.

It was the Christmas letter of 1944: “Father’s last Christmas”, a folded letter, closely written on all four sides. At the top a drawing: on the left a soldier standing to attention, his rifle over his shoulder, the steel helmet was colored in, blue. Above “My dear Else and dear children!” he saluted in front of a Christmas tree, with finely drawn needles on the branches and red candles.

“It seems they only had two crayons to choose from in the Roumanian office, and only just before the Final Victory,” Bieroth said, attempting a joke. Maja stood up abruptly and, swaying slightly, fetched a new bottle. This time she uncorked the bottle herself and filled both glasses, to the brim. In the meantime he was reading the letter and having problems with it. Maja did not sit down again at his side, but went to the gramophone. Let’s hope she doesn’t put on some sentimental German Christmas carol, he thought startled. But Maja played the Bolero again and remained standing, as if she wanted to warm herself with the music.

Her father talked about his efforts to organize a proper German Christmas feast for his comrades in the Balkans. Their pay hadn’t arrived on time, but nonetheless he had been able to scratch together some money. He had then cycled off into the village and had bought a chicken and a bottle of schnaps. The twenty-fourth had been a warm sunny day. And he himself had indulged in a rollmops from a large wooden barrel. “You can’t imagine what pleasure that is for a common soldier!” At the last moment money had come after all and her father had been able to organize more things to eat and extra alcohol. And so it became a memorable evening. The colonel had held a speech, and they had sung Christmas carols, “from rough male throats”. And it hadn’t been “overly sentimental”: the German soldiers on the Balkan front had experienced Christmas in a manner that was “serious, composed and manly”.

“And how was your Christmas Eve?” the husband and father asked after a paragraph.

Now Maja could no longer stick it out in the half-dark. She moved in closer to him, touching him, very warm, breathed her Bordeaux into his face and read with him. He felt their hair touching.

After the meal together he had then withdrawn, the father wrote, had lit a candle just for himself, had placed Maja’s Christmas stars around him, and had eaten a few of the things Mummy had made for him. Maia very carefully drew out of the envelope four Christmas stars, wrapped in tissue paper. The points had been bent over and torn. Maja held these stars in her hands, which as a child decades before she had cut out of sheets of gold paper, as if they were the very embodiment of the Christmas miracle.



The letters were coming to an end. Bieroth remembered one or two photos from one of the envelopes at the very bottom. A mountain landscape, under snow, on the peak a ruined castle, called on the back by Maja's father "Fortress Z. in the Carpathian Mountains". The castle four times over, seen from various directions. In front of it, once only, three tiny men wearing army coats who were looking, unsmiling, in the same direction. On the left her father. Bieroth thought he could see a moustache on his upper lip, but did not recognize the face.

Then the last letter, the end of April 1945, from Rumania still, together with the stamp of an American military office. Her father reported that his unit was on the move traveling west. They probably had to fill a gap in the front line. He couldn't go into any more detail. The hand as correct as ever, evenly written on the lines, not abruptly flying over the paper.

It wasn't until the end of the year that the letter reached her mother. Peace had returned quite some time ago.

"By then my father had been dead for months."

Bieroth, with tenderness almost, rearranged the shoebox so that everything was back in its original place. When his hands were free again he moved in close to Maja. They looked each other in the eyes. Maja's cheeks were aflame. She didn't look away, but nonetheless he had the feeling that her eyes meant something other than his. Looking at him they had become soft and blurred, no: looking through him.

The doorbell tore them apart. They were both startled, and immediately sat upright. Shortly afterwards the bell again, painful like a nail on glass. They were as good as drunk, the two of them.

In order to avoid saying anything, he placed his hand on Maja's thigh and stroked it slowly, pushing up her dress rather high as he did so, his eyes closed the whole time. The tips of his fingers sensed how Maja was struggling with herself. She sank into the sofa a little, as if she wanted to yield. Then a sudden move. Her body stiffened. She was standing upright when he opened his eyes, startled, she smoothed her dress, moved her hand across her flushed face, ran out, came back once again and pushed the shoebox with her foot under the sofa.

At the end of the hallway he could hear at the door to the apartment a high clear voice, the trill of a female voice, which quickly came closer. Stiff as a poker, he held on tight to the arm of the couch.

"My mother!" Maja said as she introduced the little old lady.

She stood there, a delicate figure, her shoulders a little raised, and looked around the dark room with darting eyes. Then she held out her hand. It was cold and light like a bird. In the background he could see Maja waiting, hesitatingly, in the doorway: once again a sign of sheer awkwardness in her mourning black, her lips trembling. The voice of her mother was bright and filled every corner of the room.

"Oh child, put on the light, can't you?" She smiled with an edge of

mockery. She had just come from a concert and had simply wanted to look in on the off chance.

Everything about the energetic little person now seemed familiar to Bieroth: the white pageboy haircut, her skin, the two-piece outfit in batiste. The only thing she shared with her daughter was the pale gray of her eyes, who was still in the background and seemed to be looking for something.

The mother drew up an armchair to the sofa and immediately engaged Bieroth in a conversation about art and literature. The charm of her old-fashioned cultivated manner had quickly captured him, his weak point, even to this day. The daughter came with a glass of wine, balancing it with full concentration on a silver tray.

"But child, you know I never drink any more wine at this hour!" the mother said almost casually, not turning away from him. Given his far from sober state he was hard put to it to follow the old lady. Hadn't he just published a volume of verse, she inquired, and even named the title, albeit getting it slightly wrong? With a smile she made fun of her inconsequential mistake. No, she didn't know the book, she confessed without any shyness, she had only read the review in the newspaper. She tried to keep herself well-informed, even if she had her difficulties with what passed for poetry nowadays: Now that she had made his acquaintance in such a charming fashion, she would, of course, get hold of the book.

"Keep active, always on the go!" twittered the little person seated on the edge of the armchair and shook her hands in the air so that the gold armband slid down to her elbow. That was the only way to stay young.

Maja was again seated on the sofa, far away from him at the other end, pushed to the outside, her knees together. She was silent and inhaled on her long cigarette. He couldn't decipher the expression on her face; the old lady was preoccupation enough.

At some point she laid her feather-light hand with its ruby - beautiful and in a modern setting - on his lower arm, smiled into his eyes with her head to one side and asked whether he would enjoy giving a reading in her home, in her salon, to a small select private audience.

"You can come too, Maja, if you want!"

Without hesitating he accepted her offer. Maja sat beside him and said nothing, listened to him or didn't, smoking, a woman no longer so young, someone he didn't know, without any attraction. The mother asked whether she could give him a lift in her car. He saw no reason to decline. She immediately jumped up, danced across the room and was impatient to leave. At the door he just about saw how she blew Maja a kiss...

That was so typical of life, he thought.

Jochen Bieroth stood up in front of his writing desk and stretched himself. Where would we humans be without our precise recollections, he thought, laughing. After a morning like this he really felt like bursting into song.

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## **Song of the Blackbirds**

Who is this city through which we go  
Who gave it the life that made it so?  
Is it at home, that life, in the leaning tower of spiring cathedrals  
that would touch the sky  
or does it squat beneath the mini-skirt of Venezia, the café bar  
into which so many people crowd  
for something light to eat today, before and after work  
to keep their rhythm going?  
For whom does the blackbird sing in the linden tree  
the July-sweet linden, between cars  
that loudly insist on their right to exist?  
The one who planted it lies in the cemetery  
his grave perhaps already leveled  
--and were it not for the linden tree  
there would be nowhere for the blackbird's song.  
Who gave us this city standing here  
through which we walk, stroll, rush  
at times so open-eyed, at times so blind?  
Blindly accepting what it has to offer  
What is the city which we use  
like breakfast morning after morning?  
Something given us — something found — or lent?  
Built with the strength of our arms?  
And the balance sheet - who will draw it up?  
Ourselves? Our heirs, when we depart  
and blackbirds, if God wills it so, still singing  
even without us, in young linden trees? A little of the thief, a little of the doer  
Once we gave life to the city  
The bottom line — may whoever draws it  
Avoid too straight a line.

## **Music for Jason**

The heat of the stony desert of Nevada gradually receded behind me the further north I traveled. Route 93 climbed gently, imperceptibly had it not been for the rev counter, and as the late afternoon approached and the shadows fell long and longer, I found myself suddenly ascending a mountain plateau. I could now feel a distinct chill on my skin. Instead of the heated stones of the day, now, as evening came, fresh bright grass around me, woods and I've

forgotten.meadowland. I must have missed the transition point - or didn't it exist? "... 2000 meters above sea level" was written on the road sign of the place whose name I've forgotten.

Why should I have remembered it in the first place? It was a township like any other in the west of the States. The main Street leading to the horizon -that was all. The roads that crossed it came to an end after a few houses in the piles of boulders strewn over the mountain slopes, the small amount of green on top like a three-day growth. The Capitol Club had burnt down, Sam's Diner was boarded up. Occasionally a car would move silently across the asphalt. Then, before it was too late, I did find a bar that was still open, a dark cellar. It took a while before I could make out the three or four figures leant over the counter, and I needed three or four cans of beer before the first of them spoke to me. A fairly high voice right next to me and rough: "You're not from here, right?" "Traveling through," I replied.

"Bless you," he said and held out his hand, a gray block of strength.

"Jason," he growled, in a ridiculously high voice. "We bid you welcome."

His face could hardly be seen against the darkness of the bar. Wrinkles upon wrinkles. A diagonal row of large yellow teeth, poor workmanship. The man standing next to me was definitely seventy, if not older.

"And you - are you from here?"

"No." The hand on the counter holding the can of beer rose slightly. The other hand was stuffed into the top of his overalls.

"From Europe," Jason said, "Ireland and Greece. "His grandmother came from Dublin, he had known her. But not his grandfather. He was Greek, they had told him.

"Do you know where Greece is?"

"In Europe," I confirmed, and he took a big breath, contented, and ordered me a beer. Not the sort I usually drink. We touched cans. We were getting on.

Had he been born in Europe, too? No, by God, in the States, of course, in America, in New England. But he knew the world, that was enough for him. He had worked for a long time in Florida. In the war he had served in the Pacific, in the navy, fighting against the Japs. He had wandered around the Caribbean for a couple of years. And now he was here.

"The air is good up here, believe me. The most important thing in life is the air you breathe in. There's nothing to beat it. Apart from drinking perhaps. Cheers."

It's really good living here, and he wants to stay a while longer. He can't stay in one place for long anyway. But the winter - well, the winter he's definitely going to spend here. The air, the wind, the whole climate, everything up here is so fresh and clean.

"You know something, I travel through the whole country, through every state," Jason said. His hands were damned skilful and he was clever with it.

"I repair heating systems in the motels. After all I was once a plumber, in

Virginia, a long time ago. And I do up furniture, repair upholstered chairs - those damned cigarette holes, you know what I mean. Who can do that sort of thing these days? Can you?"

Once again his high-pitched laughter, like a good buddy. When he takes a look at my hands...

"And why here?" I asked. "I mean, apart from the air -"

Jason chewed on his lip, looking for a word. Then, instead, there was a sudden jerk. He put out his cigarette, stood upright. He was bigger than I had thought.

"Come on, let me show you something." Nodded in the dark to the bartender, went out.

Outside the last light of the day. The neon advertising signs flashed into the wan light. "Vacancy" - all the motels had the same name hereabouts. Jason rolled slightly as he walked until he had found his rhythm. On his boots was dried engine grease. Powerful arms, with thick blue veins. He lit up another cigarette. Then he set off, with large strides, without another word.

Up a side road. Houses built of red brick. A few wrecked cars, stripped, in front of them.

"My cars." With a nod of his head he indicated what was beyond.

Finally we were standing in the heaps of rocks and stones in the mountain gullies. A narrow footpath. Holes in the mountain, like black eyes. Empty.

"This is my path here, right?" Jason said and cleared his chest. "This is where they lived, the gold-diggers, with all their belongings, when there was still gold in these here hills. This is my favorite spot. Once upon a time this is where it all happened. And what's here today?" He didn't want an answer. "The world is changing," I said, "we..." He was looking in the other direction. I didn't go on.

"Do you know Ireland?" he asked. I didn't have the impression that he was looking for an answer. Silently I let my gaze drift across over the whole mountainside with its holes.

"Gold," he said. There used to be any amount of gold here. Believe me, you only had to reach out for it. And there were girls... All gone."

A clattering from the town below, no: music, like a fairground or a music hall. The sexton of the Catholic church of St. John's had programmed the church-bells this week to "The Sound of Music".

Jason spat in disgust, shook himself, strode quickly to the next cave. Suddenly he halted, stood still, tilted his head towards the valley, listened intently to the evening, wide awake.

Then I heard it, too. The gentle whistling of a train, somewhere far off in the distance.

He came over to me, placed a heavy warm hand on my lower arm.

"That is the music I love, do you know that. Do you know Jamaica? Christ almighty. That's where it's at. I can tell you. .."